

## **Is the end near for Taib Mahmud?**

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COMMENT It must be the most closely guarded secret since when only a few people knew of the leukaemia that ultimately killed Abdul Razak Hussein, Malaysia's second prime minister, in January 1976.

Practically, none other than the principal himself can tell with certainty what Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud will reveal to the supreme council of his party, PBB, when it meets this morning at its headquarters in Semariang, several kilometers outside Kuching.

The fact that the Sarawak BN meets tomorrow at the same venue has triggered intense speculation that Taib, who will complete 33 years in office as CM on March 26 - a span characteristic of the tenures of dictators in one-party states, not of leaders of polities subject to periodic elections - has finally decided to call it a day.

It is a measure of the mystique Taib has diffused around him that even as the frenzy of speculation about what he intends revolves around his quitting the CM's post and elevation to the governorship of the state, there are those in his slipstream who feel that the CM is not leaving because much remains to be done and, more importantly, there is no successor who can accomplish what he has been able to: keep Umno out of Sarawak and prevent non-Muslim use of the term 'Allah' from being the divisive issue it is on the peninsula.

It's telling of the derangement of values our polity has suffered that the abovementioned accomplishments count for very much these days so that the corruption allegations in which Taib is immersed are not just now seen as disabling disqualifiers.

Three years ago, besieged with corruption allegations, Taib was propositioned about quitting before the upcoming Sarawak state election by no less than the prime minister and his deputy.

Three years on, he's still saddled with the same allegations but no one within the ruling coalition, Sarawak BN, is pushing for him to go and the demands from the opposition that he be gone pronto are sobered by the realisation that his guile at keeping Umno at bay and the Islamic genie safely corked are not achievements to be sniffed at.

"Nobody seems to know what's in store tomorrow," said one of several political aides the CM has in his retinue who spoke yesterday on the phone from Kuching on condition of anonymity.

This aide, who cannot quite believe that Taib will quit at this stage, was once vehemently opposed to the CM but has since come to feel that the man is indispensable.

The undesirable and the intolerable

"Don't I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" United States civil war President Abraham Lincoln countered usefully when criticised for being amenable to adversaries.

In the case of Taib's aide, past enmity towards the CM has not only dissipated; it's transmuted into support for extension of tenure.

This aide is sold on Edmund Burke's wisdom that the political arena does not confront its decision makers with the choice between good and better; more often than not, the 18th century Irish parliamentarian-cum-philosopher said the choice was between the undesirable and the intolerable.

"Look what you chaps are faced with in Semenanjung!" said the aide, using the Malay term for the peninsula.

"You have three races over there and the place is a mess. We have 26 ethnicities here and he has managed them reasonably well," continued the aide, in the face of mild demurrals from the other end of the mobile line that while race relations are important, clean governance is not to be scanted.

"He knows the natives here very well and rendered them the best protection which is keeping Umno at bay," the aide said in elaboration.

The aide said Taib's industrialisation drive in Sarawak would be complete when the Baram and Baleh dams are built, after Bakun and Murun have now been completed.

"Then our people would not have to go to your place for jobs; there'd be enough jobs in manufacturing here to keep them at home," added the aide in furtherance of his argument that Taib had more reasons to stay than withdraw.

Adenan Satem likely successor?

If Taib withdraws, and if he moves up to governor of the state, who would replace him as chief minister?

"I can't quite imagine that he would withdraw but if he does, I think the likeliest bet would be Adenan," said the aide.

Adenan Satem (left in photo), PBB assemblyperson for Tanjung Datu, is the special functions minister who was once Taib's brother-in-law.

Since shortly after the last state election in April 2011, Adenan has been sitting in an office in the chief minister's complex of offices, providing another option in Taib's range of replacements for him.

Compared to the other probable choices - Abang Johari Openg, Awang Tengah Hassan and Effendi Nawawi - Adenan comes up the least short on the three requisites for the office of CM: ability to control a fissiparous state BN, adequate ministerial ability, and acceptability to Sarawak's ethnic *mélange*.

"He's got the brains but whether he's got the heart for it it's hard to say," offered the aide.

The aide was not being literal about the "heart" although Adenan, 69 this year, has had a pacemaker installed.

By "heart" he meant that Adenan is a bit of a laid-back person in a role where a candidate has to work hard, additional cause for the aide to contend that Taib, still healthy at 78 come May, has a finishing canter to his now 33-year run as CM.

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